



BMG
success decoded

We Are Walsall 2040: Qualitative Report

August 2022

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Background

Walsall Council is leading on the creation of an ambitious Strategic Partnership Borough Plan to guide policy and investment for the next 18 years. This plan is called 'We Are Walsall 2040'. To help put this together the council and partners have been seeking opinions and input from those who live in, work, study, do business and visit the borough.

As part of this exercise, Walsall Council commissioned BMG Research to conduct qualitative research in order to explore the views of the residents of Walsall. The research, made up of focus groups and interviews, was used to identify the experiences of residents and feelings about the borough, as well as hopes for the future of the area. The informed recommendations will be used to support the development of the Borough Plan.

Focus groups and interviews with residents of Walsall focused on the following:

- Explore residents current experiences of living in the borough of Walsall
- Discover what residents want and need from a future borough
- Establish what residents think should be prioritised over the next 18 years
- Explore what an 'ideal' community looks like and how the borough plan can help the borough of Walsall get there
- Explore residents concerns about the future
- Establish how residents concerns can be addressed – what needs to change

Methodology

Recruitment and sample composition

In order to meet the project brief, BMG Research conducted focus groups and interviews. As this is qualitative research, the programme cannot be representative in statistical terms. Instead, the research design sought to ensure that the programme was as inclusive as possible, and ensured that a range of different potential voices and viewpoints were captured. The focus groups lasted 90 minutes, with the telephone interviews each lasting approximately 30 minutes.

In total, six focus groups took place. To capture a range of voices, groups were held with three different age groups, different social groups, and with new or expectant parents. Hard quotas were set around age, gender, and social group as well as soft quotas including ethnicity, limiting conditions, occupation, and length of residency. Six interviews were also run with new/expectant parents, to accommodate more inflexible availability and ensure enough views from this group.

BMG Research used a recruitment agency to source participants for four focus groups. For the other two, covering young people and new/expectant parents, participants were recruited via a sign-up link which Walsall Council shared with relevant community groups. To accommodate busy and unpredictable schedules, new/expectant parents were asked whether they would prefer to take part in a focus group or telephone interview, so the participants for these were also recruited via this sign-up



link. Interviews and focus groups were held remotely via Zoom or telephone. Incentives were £50 Love2Shop vouchers for the focus groups and £25 Love2Shop vouchers for interviews.

In total, the views of 48¹ individuals were captured during the qualitative research. A full breakdown of the focus group and interview sample can be found below:

Group	Sample	Make-up
Adult 1 28.06.22	7	3 x male 4 x female 25-44 SEG ABC1
Adult 2 29.06.22	8	4 x male 4 x female 25-44 SEG C2DE
Adult 3 05.07.22	7	4 x male 4 x female 45+ (no more than 2 residents over 70) SEG ABC1
Adult 4 07.07.22	6	4 x male 2 x female 45+ (no more than 2 residents over 70) SEG C2DE
Young people 06.07.22	6	2 x male 4 x female 18-23 Mix of SEG
New or expectant parents 09.08.22	7	2 x male 5 x female Mix of ages and SEG
Interviews with new or expectant parents 08.08.22 – 22.08.22	7	2 x male 5 x female Mix of ages and SEG
Soft quotas across groups	General mix across groups of: Life stage/ household make-up Occupation Ethnicity Disability Length of residency in Walsall Feeling towards Walsall Borough Council	
Notes	Confirm that all participants are Walsall residents Remaining participants for each group could be male, female or non-binary	
Total Sample	48	

¹ N.b. due to the nature of some groups with some respondents joining and leaving during conversations, this figure may not be completely accurate and should be taken as an estimation.

Research design

Format and topic guide

Topic guides for the discussions were designed in conjunction with Walsall Council. The core guide was adapted somewhat for the young people's focus group, and the new and expectant parents' group, to ensure needs specific to these groups were discussed. For example, questions for parents were framed as thinking about their hopes for their children's future in Walsall. As well as these three slightly different topic guides, we used an altered guide for the in-depth interviews, as the nature of conversation is different in a one-on-one setting. Despite structured discussion guides, the conversations were only guided, with the respondents given the freedom to address whichever issues they felt were most important to them. This flexibility was particularly useful when speaking with the focus groups, as having several voices means that topics may emerge that had not been anticipated but are clearly important to one or several participants.

The discussion structure for the focus groups and in-depth interviews was loosely split into multiple sections: an introduction; general thoughts about living in the borough and the facilities and services available; their vision of the ideal borough; hopes and aspirations for the future; and thoughts on what should and should not be included in the borough plan.

All groups and in-depth interviews were moderated by a team of experienced qualitative researchers.

Confidentiality

For both online and telephone sessions, respondents were assured that all information provided would be treated in the strictest confidence; that BMG Research would not identify any individuals or disclose the personal details of those who took part; and that views stated would not be attributable to individuals. BMG's independence and impartiality from Walsall Council was also reiterated, to ensure confidence amongst participants when sharing their views.

Respondents were informed that the discussion would (with participants' consent) be audio-recorded, that the files would be stored securely at BMG Research and would not be made available to anyone outside of BMG, and that they would be securely destroyed on completion of this project. They were informed that quotes from the discussions may be used in the research report; these quotes have been incorporated through this report to illustrate the findings, and bring the participants voice to the forefront of the research. During focus groups, notes were collated by an observing moderator during groups to ensure accuracy, and to allow verbatim quotes to be used throughout the report.

Analysis and reporting

Data analysis

We used a grounded theory approach for the analysis of the focus group data meaning that all themes and findings that are reported against the key areas of interest have emerged 'organically' through the research rather than through hypothesis testing, thus making the overall findings more robust and grounded in the experiences and views of respondents.

To achieve this, once the focus groups and interviews were completed, they were analysed through inductive reasoning using a thematic framework. Firstly, the key themes, categories, and topics which

arose during the interviews were identified through an initial review of a selection of moderator notes, and through listening to a selection of recordings. This inductive process of analysis ensures that there is no unconscious bias on the part of the researcher, and that each theme identified is evidence-based.

Deductive reasoning was then used to ensure that once these themes had been identified, they were triple checked against the raw data. Each key theme and topic was translated into a core document, collating all thematic information which related to the core theme or insight identified. This deductive process ensured that initial insights collated from the inductive process were robust and correct, as well as allowing the research to build on findings, and understand any nuances or reasons for any contradictions found.

Finally, focus group data was divided and analysed at a group level so as to enable disaggregation and aggregation of the data for different demographic groups. This process ensures that the researcher is able to unearth core insights and nuances, leaving no stone unturned.

Note on the interpretation of qualitative research and data

A focus group is a small, informal discussion group made up by members of a particular audience and moderated by a professional researcher. The group members' different views and experiences combine to create a unique and useful conversation.

An in-depth interview is a conversation held with just two people: the respondent and the moderator. Though, on the surface, groups and depths may seem conversational and informal, professional moderators are well trained in observing participants and probing where they believe a participant can further share important viewpoints and insights.

Groups and depths can provide understanding of what people think, need, want and care about, and can explore the reasons behind these views. The researcher guides the group or individual through a series of topics (agreed beforehand with the client), but in a less structured way than with a quantitative questionnaire or survey.

Findings may emerge from groups and depths which the researcher and client had not previously considered; these can be identified and explored. It is the moderator's job to ensure that client questions are answered and that every respondent has an opportunity to express his or her point of view.

It should be remembered that participants may hold views that are based on incorrect information. It is the moderator's role to explore and report participants' perceptions, not necessarily to correct any misunderstanding or incorrect perceptions. Where information may be incorrect, this can be just as valuable for the client, and provide them with an opportunity to educate their participants and correct their perceptions through targeted communications.

When interpreting the findings from focus groups and depth interviews, it is important to note that they are not based on quantitative, statistical evidence.

It should also be borne in mind that there is a tendency for group discussions to induce participants to express any critical views they hold; this is particularly the case for the subject matter of accessing GP services. This report should be read with these notes of caution in mind.

Executive Summary

Residents felt that the town centre was rundown and no longer inviting for residents. The departure of several shops from the high-street, the lack of maintenance and upkeep, and feeling unsafe left several residents travelling outside of Walsall to find places to shop, eat and socialise. Residents had very little reason to go to the centre of Walsall and would avoid it if they could.

Residents of all ages complained that there was not a lot to do in the borough of Walsall. Residents wanted to see more activities, leisure, clubs and events put on in the borough. They would frequently travel to surrounding areas such as Birmingham or Sutton Coldfield for something to do as there wasn't enough on offer in Walsall. Young people were especially critical of what was available and wanted to see more areas to spend time with their friends, such as paintballing and bowling. They also wanted places to stay open longer at night. Parents of older children wanted the return of youth clubs and safe spaces for their children to socialise. For the newer parents, they wanted to see more playgroups, playgrounds and children's areas across the borough.

Many residents expressed the need for more health, education, employment and community support for themselves or their loved ones. Residents wanted better support and socialising for the elderly, and more support, clinics and drop-in centres for mental health. For young people, the priority was support with finding the right education for them and help understanding employment options. For new parents more support was needed with maternal and post-natal care, but also support in the first year of their baby's life. New parents wanted more classes, activities, health visits and opportunities to meet other parents.

The majority of residents used their car to travel around Walsall and complained about the condition of the roads. Potholes were one of the biggest complaints among drivers as they had caused damage to several cars. Residents also had to swerve to avoid them which put the driver, other cars and pedestrians at risk. Yellow lines and road markings were also a frequent complaint as they had faded in several areas which left residents unclear about where they were able to park. The final concern from road users was the traffic, traffic lights and one-way systems. Residents felt roadworks had been up too long and make rush hour traffic a "nightmare".

Green spaces were very important to residents and they wanted to see better maintenance to preserve them. All residents enjoyed using green spaces and many cited it as the top activity they do in Walsall. Residents wanted to see better care taken of benches, play areas and skate parks as vandalism and graffiti were prevalent, as were some bush and table fires. Residents also wanted to see the facilities improved and maintained across parks. They wanted all parks to contain cafes, play parks, sandpits, tennis courts and gym equipment. Residents valued the borough's green parks and wanted to make sure they were maintained over the next 18 years.

Most residents tended to feel unsafe at times due to antisocial behaviour. Residents across each resident group cited antisocial behaviour in residential areas, parks and green spaces as reasons they avoid them at night. The lack of CCTV and poor lighting made residents especially wary and many reported feeling uneasy or having to look over their shoulder. Residents were most frustrated that they didn't think much was being done to prevent break ins, car theft or antisocial behaviour. Residents had noticed a distinct lack of police presence in the streets, and in response, some stated local community safety groups had emerged. When police were present, such as in Walsall town centre, residents

mentioned a lack of respect for them from the public and therefore wanted to see bigger deterrents so the police and their actions were taken more seriously.

There is a general lack of community spirit among residents, although crime prevention has united some residents. Most residents did not feel like there was any community spirit or that residents came together, except for a few occasions such as the jubilee and clap for carers. Residents wanted community centres and community hubs to be reinstated, with events and activities put on to help residents meet one another. Where residents have come together is on community forums where they report any crimes or warnings for others. Residents have even set up their own community safety groups with panic buttons for elderly residents to ensure everybody is safe.

Climate change was acknowledged as a major issue facing the area, but residents were unsure what they could do in response and wanted to see more action and direction from the council. While residents were unsure how big an impact their own actions and the councils' actions could be, they still wanted to see a change made and see evidence of what the council was doing. Residents also wanted the council to encourage them to do more and change their own behaviours. However, while climate change was seen as a significant challenge, residents did not see it as a priority for the council as they prioritised the facilities, services and infrastructure as this makes a greater difference on their day to day lives.

Residents wanted to see Walsall town centre become a “central hub of activity” and some life injected back into it. While shops were an important draw to attract people to visit, most residents were happy to shop online and therefore saw the role of the town centre to be more of a central hub of activity. Residents wanted to see restaurants, bars, clubs, cinemas and activities such as mini golf, paintballing and bowling. Residents wanted the town centre to be bustling once again and attract people from outside of the borough into Walsall.

There was no one clear priority of what the council should focus on among residents, and many indicated the priorities were linked. Many residents said one priority for improvement was the town centre, but they also felt a key element of this was improving the transport links, roads and cost of parking as there had to be a way for people to get to the town centre, and a reason for people to travel. Residents were also aware of the interlocking results of their priorities, for example linking investment to better job opportunities, and more activities for young people to reduce crime.

Detailed Findings

Perceptions of Walsall Town Centre

The town centre is generally felt to be rundown and lacking investment

One core finding from the focus groups was that the majority of residents felt the town centre was looking rundown and lacking investment. Participants noted how several shops were either empty or boarded up which did not give the centre a welcoming feel. They recalled how shops would open up in the town centre but close again soon after, and several shops that had been a staple of the town had also shut, leaving the high street looking and feeling bare. Many of the short-term or current shops were thought to sell cheap products that residents did not need, such as second-hand mobile phones.

Due to the current state of the town centre, many residents did not think there was a compelling enough reason to go there, and those that were passing though did not find the centre inviting or a place they wanted to be. Many residents actively avoided the centre as there was nothing for them there.

“It’s just not a happy place to go to. Definitely needs some TLC.”

“[It needs to be] Brighter, cleaner, and greener inside the town centre. At the moment it’s dull, dark, and depressing. We need to brighten it up again.”

“The town centre looks scruffy and a mess all the time.”

The lack of upkeep in the area makes some residents feel unsafe, especially at night time or with their children

Some residents felt unsafe in the town centre, particularly at night, due to people under the influence of alcohol spilling out of pubs, people socialising in the town centre at night and the aforementioned downtrodden feeling of the town centre. Some residents made the point that members of the community did not respect the town centre, resulting in a lot of rubbish, graffiti and broken glass, all of which made it feel less safe.

It was particularly clear among residents with children (not just the young parent’s group), that they would feel unsafe walking with their children, or pushing a pram, and would not want their children to hang around in the town centre alone for fear that they would get involved in some trouble.

Residents wanted the town centre to be turned into a central hub of activity

When asked what they wanted the town centre to be, many alluded to the town centre becoming a central hub of activity. They wanted somewhere they could eat, drink, do brunch, meet with friends and find activities and things to do. Furthermore, they wanted the town centre to be inviting and a place they could spend their free time. The Waterfront and Crown Wharf area was repeatedly given as an example of how the rest of the town should be. The Waterfront was considered clean, inviting, offered places to eat and had an independent cinema. Residents wanted to see the Waterfront area expanded

to include more restaurants, cafes, bars and activities, such as mini golf or bowling. Most would also like to see shops restored as many saw it as a core activity, but this was lower down on the list of priorities as the alternatives, such as the Bullring and online shopping, were more appealing.

Residents thought that offering more activities and places to eat would not only attract those living in Walsall, but also attract people from outside of the borough. They recognised that this in turn would bring more money into the local economy and create more job opportunities. Furthermore, Walsall would be a place residents would be proud to call home. Residents currently felt embarrassed of how run down the town was and would actively ask friends and family to avoid the town centre when visiting.

Young people shared the views of most residents and wanted some life to be injected into the town centre

Young people were also very critical of the town centre and described it as “*boring*”. They said more shops were needed, as well as restaurants and things to do (e.g. bowling, arcades and paintballing).

Young people also found the town centre to be dirty and unsafe. They suggested a general tidy up of the area, and the introduction of more “*exciting*” places to visit.

However, while young people said there should be more shops, there was later general agreement that they themselves and most others would be happy to shop online, bringing back the idea of the town being a central hub of activity beyond just shopping.

Things to do in the borough of Walsall

Many residents have found there isn't enough to do in the borough of Walsall

Another complaint heard frequently from residents was regarding the lack of activities and things to do in the borough. Residents didn't feel there was anything to do in their spare time, and would usually travel outside of the borough for a day out, for example to Birmingham. These days out included shopping, eating and children's activities, all of which did not seem to be available within Walsall.

Residents that had lived in Walsall for a long time tended to agree this wasn't always the case. They had fond memories of activities in parks, funfairs and markets that they used to visit, but they did not think they were available anymore. This was even more pertinent after COVID-19 closed several businesses or reduced the capacity due to staff shortages. As a result, residents wanted to see more restaurants, markets, crafts, community events, museums, specialist shops and park events that were suited to all ages.

Parents also felt there were not enough activities for children and young people

There was particular attention paid by parents to activities for children and young people. Parents wanted to see more activity centres that were open all year round, more local community centres with groups for young children and more days out targeting children's play and learning.

Education was key for activities as parents wanted their children to be able to learn while they played. This was especially important among the new parents as many of their children had grown up in lockdown and there needed to be more activities that encouraged the socialising and development they may have lacked in their early months and years.

Activities that were well received, and residents wanted to see more of included sandpits, play parks and baby/toddler groups. While parents admitted the borough provided these activities already, they wanted to see more and a better variety. For example, one parent wanted more play equipment in parks as opposed to just swings and a slide. In addition to this it was particularly important that these opportunities should be affordable or free so that all children had access.

Parents of older children wanted to see more places for their children to safely spend time, such as youth centres. They wanted safe spaces that provided games for older children so they could independently meet up with their friends, without parents worrying about where they were.

“No youth centres or anywhere to go...if you want to chill with your friends. I used to go to a place in Sutton Coldfield to sit with friends, play music, get food...nothing like that to do in Walsall.”

“It feels like there is nothing for children. When I first came there were Surestart child centres but they have all closed down. I don’t know where to take my child because there are limited facilities.”

Young people were especially critical of what they could do in Walsall

When relaying the few options available to them, young people were uninspired by Walsall. Residents recalled how the shopping centre was no longer viable as all the “good” clothes shops, such as TK Maxx had closed down. Leisure facilities such as the Gala Baths and gym were seen as “run down” (despite a recent internal refurbishment) and not targeted towards their age group. Ninja Warrior was mentioned as a great new activity, but was thought to be targeted slightly more towards younger children.

Young people tended to find activities outside of the borough, mentioning the lure of McDonalds and Primark in Birmingham proving to be more appealing, despite both also existing in Walsall town centre. Young people said:

“For youngsters there’s not much leisure facilities or activities for them.”

“The shopping centre is quite boring now; all the good clothes shops are closed” “everyone [young] is just going to Birmingham to get shopping because they have a McDonalds and a Primark.”

Some residents noticed derelict buildings around the borough. Their suggestion was to turn these into something to do for residents, something beneficial, such as cafes, cinemas, gaming stations, mini golf and bowling.

Nightlife was also mentioned as an area for improvement. Residents wanted to go out at night but didn’t think there were many options. It wasn’t just pubs and clubs that young people classified as

nightlife, they wanted to see alternatives to drinking venues, such as cafes, bowling, paintballing and mini golf open later at night.

Parents also found there were barriers to doing activities with their children

We heard from one mother that it was difficult to get out and about in Walsall with children, and not many places catered to them. For example, shops, public transport and restaurants were not suited to double pushchairs and very few restaurants had highchairs. This mother had stayed at home several times before as she knew that if she went out, she wouldn't be able to change her baby's nappy or feed the children on time. She wanted to see a return of the kid's areas in Asda cafes, more shops for children, and more play areas across the town centre. She also took inspiration from the Bullring where they had plenty of places to fill bottles, feed and change babies. Other parents said how there were not enough activities to do with their children, as classes were either cancelled or too expensive. They wanted more classes to help with their baby's development, but also help them meet other parents.

Support within the borough of Walsall

Many residents expressed the need for more support for the elderly

Residents with elderly family members didn't think there was enough support for the elderly in the borough. Many residents confided that their parents/grandparents were lonely and didn't get out of the house very often. They wanted to see more community events specifically targeted for elderly people to give them some activities in the day and a chance to socialise. One resident had witnessed their relative become more isolated since the pandemic and thought they needed some support getting more involved in society once again. They wanted to see more of an effort made to make the elderly feel more comfortable when out and about.

"I know my grandma is lonely and there's not a lot of options for the elderly."

Improvements to mental health support were also mentioned

A wider issue within the borough, and mentioned by younger residents, expectant and new parents and older residents, was mental health. Residents either had personal or close experience with this, or recognised that many people within the borough needed support with their mental health, but waiting lists were long. While residents wanted more GP appointments for mental health available, they also wanted to see more tailored support in places such as clinics, community centres and drop-in sessions. Residents also recognised that more community-based activities could help with mental health as they would get residents out and about and socialising. These community-based activities could include community allotments and gardens and volunteer work such as painting or offering support to the elderly.

Among the younger residents there was demand for more support with education and employment

Younger people wanted to receive more support with their higher education, especially if they had experienced bullying or needed to get out of mainstream schooling. They wanted to see more support to stay in school, but also more support with what their options could be if they were struggling in mainstream school. This meant more sessions with counsellors and more guidance and advice.

“I dropped out of college due to bullying, I found it very difficult to find another college or apprenticeship. Job Centre didn’t offer anything. Went with mum to find something to do, ended up at a college for more vulnerable/less educated people. No support around what I wanted to do, didn’t feel listened to.”

“Kids are slipping under the radar and being missed because the services aren’t picking them up.”

Young mothers faced struggles balancing childcare with education. They said there were plenty of nurseries but struggled to find any that would take their children for enough hours while they were in education or at work

“My daughter goes to nursery in Birmingham, I’m at uni so I needed a nursery. I couldn’t find one close to where I live ... childminder for my daughter is from Birmingham and has to come to Walsall to get my daughter.”

More support around employment was also requested, with one young person saying *“it feels like we’re not really given an insight into employment and different options for employment”*. Young people saw employment as a key priority for Walsall, but they didn’t know what to do when they left school. They recalled how they didn’t get any support at school when deciding on their next steps. They would have like to have had workshops or *“ways of getting your foot through the door”*, such as internships, work experience, career days/fairs and classes that teach employment skills.

Young mothers in the group also hadn’t received any support getting back to employment, and found there were barriers to their entry back into the workforce.

“I’m a single parent... free/affordable childcare was dropped when they realised I was 23, not under 20. The rest of my family are working, so there’s not really any people I can rely on [for childcare].’ Those my age don’t get the support of getting back into employment anymore.”

Parents also wanted to see more education and job seeking support for their children. Parents of younger children wanted to see more support for children in education, especially those with special needs. One mother had to wait a year for her son to get classroom assistance despite her son having additional needs. There was a similar story from the mother of an autistic child who took a long time to get the additional support he needs.

Parents required more maternal and post-natal support

Some parents had struggled to receive support through their pregnancy, after they had given birth and in the first year of their child’s life. One participant who was expecting a baby had kept her doctor from Wolverhampton, as she had heard from friends that that there were long delays when trying to see a doctor in Walsall, especially in maternity departments.

Within the first year of their child's life, several residents in the new parent's group had not received any support or health visits and felt like they were left on their own, especially first-time parents. One resident did not receive any health visits so proactively reached out to drop-in sessions. However, these were all cancelled and never went ahead.

"I didn't have anything from a health visitor [in the first year], I had to constantly reach out and I felt like I really needed it. I was told I could attend drop-in sessions but they were all closed and this was after covid."

One new parent who received no support would have liked to have been offered new baby classes or support groups with other parents of new-born babies. There were some private courses that offered this but they were unaffordable.

Transport

Public transport was a priority for younger residents, but they wanted to increase how safe they felt when travelling

Among young people, transport was seen as a priority, as many worked or socialised outside of Walsall. They wanted to see safety and security improved on public transport, as they could often feel intimidated, especially when alone at night. This included more CCTV and stamping out antisocial behaviour. They also wanted to see transport links maintained and on time. Public transport enabled young people to expand their area and travel easily to surrounding towns and cities. Public transport was key to making young people's lives easier, they just needed to be able to guarantee their safety when using it.

For the older residents, buses were generally seen as fine, though could have more regular services, but trains needed more investment. Residents felt trains were too expensive and there were not enough services. Cycle routes were also cited as not being well maintained, with bushes overgrowing cycle paths, and concerns that they were not well lit at night. Residents said they felt unsafe cycling at night due to the lack of CCTV and lighting.

Residents consistently complained about the condition of roads in and around the borough of Walsall

Residents made several comments about road conditions and maintenance. Many residents had experienced potholes in residential areas and on the roads around Walsall, and some participants had faced large repair costs after driving over potholes. One participant had considered buying a new car to avoid damaging their suspension. Another concern about potholes was that it resulted in dangerous driving. Residents in the young people group recalled how cars would swerve to avoid potholes which would then put all objects and people around the car at risk.

Residents also complained that yellow lines were faded and it was therefore hard to know where you could and couldn't park. Roads were also narrow in residential areas meaning residents parked over the pavements and those walking had to use the road, again increasing their risk.

Another complaint heard across focus groups was in regards to the roadworks and congestion. Residents felt temporary traffic lights and roadworks had been up for too long, especially around M6 junction 10 and 7, and they were causing congestion and extended journeys. Residents that travelled between 7 and 8am described traffic as a "nightmare" and a constant source of annoyance.

"Traffic lights have been an absolute nightmare for about 2 years."

"[Roads] need upkeep and repairs. I end up having to go on a road because cars aren't parked properly, double yellow lines aren't there/are faded, people swerve to avoid potholes."

Congestion and existing roadworks were also seen as blocking development into long term solutions. One example given was that they were all for Smart Motorways, but with the current state of congestion and roadworks around the main roads, the priority was getting the roads working.

Green Spaces and Cleanliness

Green spaces were very important to residents

There was general consensus across the groups that the green spaces across the borough were pleasant and provided enough outdoor space. The vast majority of residents were especially happy with the Walsall Arboretum. It was also clear that green spaces were very important to residents as they provided a play area for children, a social space for meeting friends, a day trip out, leisure and exercise and a retreat. Residents believed parks made a huge difference to the area, and their own mental and physical health, and therefore must be maintained.

Further improvements to green spaces were welcomed

However, while residents were generally pleased with what they had, they still asked for further improvements made to green spaces. Residents wanted to see more facilities within parks, such as cafes, outdoor gym equipment, play areas, sandpits and tennis courts.

They also wanted to see current facilities better maintained, such as the run-down toilets. One resident mentioned that they were pleased when a new playground a skatepark was built in Rushall Park, but the lack of maintenance has meant there has been no upkeep and it is now covered with graffiti.

Parents wanted to see more variety in the play areas, such as sand pits, climbing frames, puzzles, slides and ziplines to give their children the opportunity to play, learn and explore.

Residents also wanted to see less vandalism and litter

The other complaint from residents was that green spaces, and residential areas, could be cleaned up. Residents noticed lots of fly tipping, litter and broken glass, which was especially a problem for residents walking their dogs. This made green spaces less attractive to residents and made them feel less safe when walking around, especially at night time. To avoid this, one resident would drive further away to a

space with no broken glass. It was also reported that there was a lack of dog waste bins so bags would be thrown around the park instead.

Residents also noted vandalism and anti-social behaviour, such as graffiti, broken play equipment and bushes set on fire. There was a call for more CCTV and monitoring of the areas, to stop the parks being ruined. Residents believed that if green spaces were better maintained, residents would take more pride in looking after these areas and litter and vandalism would be reduced.

“If community spaces were maintained and a little bit more attractive, I think people have pride about their areas and I think people would respect it a little bit more because they are destroyed or vandalised very quickly.”

Safety and Crime in the borough of Walsall

Some residents felt unsafe around Walsall due to antisocial behaviour

Residents generally felt unsafe around Walsall, especially women, and many feared for the safety of their children who were going out and about on their own. Anti-social behaviour made people “*look over their shoulder*” and “*feel on edge*”. Younger residents spoke about feeling unsafe on buses or when walking passed groups talking loudly in the street. One young resident said they would love to go on evening walks alone but does not feel it is safe enough.

“You never know what people’s intentions are when they are looking at you, you’re always on egg shells”.

Within the town centre, residents said they did not feel safe at night as the quality of drinking establishments lead to excessive alcohol consumption and antisocial behaviour such as fighting. Residents would try and avoid these areas.

Within residential areas there were reports of car breaks ins and thefts, antisocial behaviour, loud music and drug use. In response to the safety fears, some residents had started their own community safety groups to guard their neighbour’s safety. Older residents were offered a panic button so somebody nearby could help if a crime was committed. Residents would like to see more street lights and council backing for residential groups that protect the local community.

Many residents fear there has been an increase in crime and question the police presence

Lots of residents were members of community groups (e.g., Facebook) and had noticed a lot of reports of home and car break ins and antisocial behaviour. Residents were unclear what was being done to stop this and very rarely saw an outcome to crimes posted in community groups. Residents wanted more police on the streets to act as a deterrent and be on the scene quicker when a crime was committed. It was also noted that younger people seemed to have lost some respect for police, and so they should be doing more in the community to show that they are there to protect and help. Residents didn’t feel there was anything stopping antisocial behaviour and there was little chance of perpetrators being caught. They wanted a bigger deterrent from doing crime to make Walsall a safer place to live.

“A lot of kids vandalise shops. In the park there was a lot of litter that boys set fire to. A police car stopped and then drove away. The police only have handcuffs and they have nothing to scare people to not do crime.”

“Walsall is quite a reactive area. We have been petitioning to have a lollipop lady and the response we have is we have no reason to put anything in there, we have to wait until something happens.”

One resident acknowledged that social media made you more aware of crime and it wasn't necessarily that more crime was taking place. However, social media could be turned into a positive and used to reassure residents of how their areas are being protected and what is being done to prevent crime in Walsall.

Community Spirit

There is a general lack of community spirit among residents

Community spirit all year round tends to lack in Walsall. Despite occasional events, such as clapping for carers, or Jubilee celebrations, residents do not feel there is any community spirit in their areas. They attribute this in part to a lack of opportunities to meet neighbours and make friends, and acknowledge that aspects such as community safety, trust, and local organisations and events are all interrelated with community spirit.

Community centres and clubs have either shut down or do not put on many occasions. Many residents said there was no community hub, in any form, to bond residents together. Residents said that more activities put on for children, especially during the holidays, would be a good way for residents to meet up. Others suggested communal allotments which give the community a shared space to look after or putting up decorations around Christmas.

Crime prevention has bonded communities together

While there was a feeling that there are not enough community events or activities, residents have been able to feel a sense of community from neighbours looking out for each other. As aforementioned, residents don't see much of a police presence in Walsall therefore have to look out for themselves and their neighbours. Residents post warnings in community groups, share private CCTV or doorbell footage and look out for elderly residents who may be more vulnerable.

Climate Change

There was general consensus that tackling climate change is important, but very few believed they or the council could play a large part in this

Residents believed that climate change was one of the major challenges facing the world, but were unsure what impact they as individuals could have. Residents also questioned the impact the council

could have on tackling climate change, and stated this was a global fight which large corporations and world leaders should be at the forefront of. It was hard for residents to see what impact they could have if larger organisations continued to damage the environment.

The most common way in which residents were doing their part was through recycling. We also saw the residents in the young persons' group used public transport to get around, but in other groups most adults used a car as their only method of transport. Beyond recycling and transport, residents seemed unsure about what they could do to help tackle climate change.

Residents would like to do more but face barriers such as cost

Young people commented on how they would like to be encouraged to do more to help and used examples of community allotments and Asda offering loose produce to reduce plastic. However, while willing to do more to help, residents in the young person group noted how the more sustainable options are usually the most expensive, and therefore unattainable. Older residents found a barrier to being more sustainable was the practicality.

One solution residents came up with was to expand the learning children receive on climate change at schools to residents through community groups. By engaging the community more, they could learn how to become more sustainable and help teach the next generation.

There was appetite among residents to hear more about the council's plans to tackle climate change

Residents were unsure what the council were either doing, planning to do or had already achieved to tackle climate change, and wanted to see more evidence from them. One resident used Birmingham as an example, noting that the clean air zones were evidence that council were doing something and it would be good to see something similar in Walsall. They noticed a lot of billboards and recycling bins in surrounding areas, but the lack of communication on climate change in Walsall made it seem like it was "*still in the dark ages*". One resident had a sister with asthma and felt the air quality around the borough was concerning and only getting worse.

Despite recognising the importance of climate change, it was not mentioned as a council priority for residents

Most residents recognised the importance of tackling climate change, but when asked about their priorities in the borough and what they would include in a 18-year plan, most focused on the services, facilities and infrastructure as opposed to green initiatives, because they saw these as more immediately impactful things in their community. The overwhelming feeling was that residents cared about climate change but did not see what big impact the council could have.

Integration of Priorities

Residents tended to feel that priorities were interlinked

Across groups we have seen there is no one clear priority for residents, and many indicated the priorities are interlinked and were therefore hesitant to prioritise one above the other when asked. For example, many residents felt improvements to the town centre were needed to encourage residents and people from outside of the borough to spend time and money in the centre, but they also felt a key element of this was improving the transport links, roads and cost of parking as there had to be a way for people to get to the town centre, and a reason for people to travel.

The core priorities we heard across groups were transport, road maintenance, town centre investment, health and wellbeing, community and activities, with no clear priority above the others. As well as the link between the town centre and transport, we also saw a link between health, community and activities. Residents felt it was important activities were put on to keep people active and bring the community together. Residents were also aware of the interlocking results of their priorities, for example linking investment to better job opportunities, and more activities for young people to reduced crime.

“shopping needs improving, and that drives jobs which is really important.”

Priorities differed from things residents disliked about the borough

Groups tended to prioritise the things they didn't have, as opposed to improve what they did. One hypothesis as to why this may be is residents may feel that once the services are improved, it will lead to a development of the tangibles, with a belief that it is less likely to happen the other way around.

While we saw priorities often linked to each other, we also saw priorities differed from the main thing's residents wanted to see improved. Tangible elements like shops, park and trains were said to need improvement by most residents, but rarely mentioned when asked what their priorities were. Residents didn't see the things that they could touch and feel as a priority to fix, and seemed to accept the condition they were in, despite thinking they could be improved. Instead, it was the intangibles such as arts and culture, safety, community, health, activities and services that residents picked as their priorities for the next 18 years.

Appendix 1: Focus Group Welcome and Briefing

Introduction:

- Facilitator to introduce themselves
- Thank participants for agreeing to take part in a focus group
- Explain the objective of research and the value of their participation: to help the development of a borough wide plan to 2040
- Explain how the group will work: the facilitator will guide the conversation. If things are going off track, the facilitator will try to steer the conversation back to the main focus of the discussion.
- There are no right or wrong answers
- No one has to answer any questions they do not feel comfortable answering
- Please be respectful of others' opinions
- If online address housekeeping protocols (cameras on, mute when not speaking)
- Incentives will be distributed via email within 5 working days of the end of the session
- Ask participants to find a pen and paper (if they have not already got one)

Length: The group should take approximately 90 minutes

Confidentiality: All information you provide will be treated confidentially. We will not identify any individuals or share the personal details of those who took part. Your responses are strictly confidential which is required by the Market Research Society.

- Views stated are not linked to individuals and the more open and honest you can be the better.
- We may use some of the things you say in our reports, but we won't reveal who said them. This is in line with the Market Research Society Code of Conduct.
- Ask permission to record and reassure that recording will not be shared outside of BMG and will be securely deleted within 6 months.
- We will securely delete your contact details within 6 months.
- Recording: we would like to audio-record the discussion to accurately capture all the information you share with us. The audio will be used for analysis purposes only and will not be shared with anyone outside of BMG research.

Appendix 2: Discussion Guide – Initial 4 Adult Groups

Background and introduction (5 minutes)

- **First I'd like to ask everyone to say a bit about themselves.**
- *Moderator to facilitate 'icebreaker' introductions with groups. Ask for:*
 1. Name?
 2. Where do you live (town)?
 3. How long have you lived there? Who do you live with?

Current experience of Walsall and Walsall council (30 minutes)

Task: Best and Worst things about the borough (of Walsall)

Ask respondents to write down the 3-5 things they think are best/they like about living in the borough of Walsall, and 3-5 things they think are bad/could be improved.

- **I'd like to now ask you to voice what you wrote down for the best things?**
 - Why did you say XX?
 - Do you have any specific experiences you can tell us in relation to XX?
 - Do you think these things are important in making somewhere a good place to live?
 - *Moderator to allow for general discussion around the topics mentioned, gauge agreement, demographic differences.*
- **And now, what did everyone write down for things that could be improved?**
 - Why did you say XX?
 - Do you have any specific experiences you can tell us in relation to XX?
 - Do you think these things are important in making somewhere a good place to live?
 - *Moderator to allow for general discussion around the topics mentioned, gauge agreement, demographic differences.*
- **How do you find the facilities in the borough?**
 - How is the quality of housing?
 - How are the schools/education services?
 - How do you find travelling around the borough of Walsall?
 - Is there any congestion
 - Is public transport easily available?
 - Do you find there are enough green spaces?
 - Are there enough things to do in the borough of Walsall? Think about sports and leisure, eating and drinking, shopping, culture and arts, activities for children.
 - What would you like to see more of?
- **Are there any groups of people you think the borough of Walsall caters particularly well for, over others?**
 - Young families? Businesses? Students? Young professionals? Retired people?
 - Why?

- **Is there a sense of community where you live?**
 - Are there any community activities that you are a part of or have heard about?
 - Can you give examples
 - How does it feel to be involved/not involved in the community?
 - How often, if ever, do you come together as a community?
 - Is there any support and/or facilities for older people, vulnerable people, and disabled people?

- **Is there anything you are currently concerned about in the borough Walsall?**
 - Probes: employment, affordable housing, crime
 - Why do you say that?

- **How safe do you feel when out and about in the borough of Walsall?**
 - During the day?
 - After dark?
 - What, if anything, worries you? Why?

The 'ideal' borough (15 minutes)

Show participants a list of facilities and ask them to prioritise them from highest to lowest importance.

- **Please share what you put as the highest and lowest priority**
 - Why is this your highest priority?
 - Why is this your lowest priority?

Ask participants to write down a couple of bullets on what their ideal borough would look like

- **Please share what your 'ideal' borough would look like with the rest of the group**
 - Why would this be your ideal?
 - Why did you focus on these areas?
 - How would you feel if you lived in your 'ideal' borough?

- **What are the main differences between your 'ideal' borough and your current experience of where you live now?**

Aspirations for the future of Walsall (15 minutes)

- **Thinking about the next 18 years in the borough of Walsall, what would you like the future to look like?**
 - What is the most important thing you would like to see where you live, work and socialise in the next 18 years?
 - Why do you say this?
 - Do you think others would agree with you?
 - Is there anything that you would not like to see change?
 - Why do you say this?

- **What do you think the next 18 years will look like?**

- How do you envisage life in the borough of Walsall in the next 18 years?
 - Do you think you will still live in the area?
- Where do you think changes or improvements will be made?
 - What do you think will stay the same?
- **What do you think should be prioritised over the next 18 years to improve the borough?**
 - Why do you think this?
 - Would you like to see an improvement to the facilities and services?
 - Probe with: infrastructure, safety, education, open space, health services
 - How could be improved?
- **Are you concerned about the impact of climate change in the future?**
 - Why are you concerned / what concerns you?
 - How might organisations and residents work together to tackle the effects of climate change?
 - What are you already doing or would be willing to do to tackle climate change?
 - Would you like there to be a green agenda in Walsall over the next 18 years?
 - What would you like to see happen?
- **Do you think Walsall Council and the partner organisations they work with are on track to achieve positive change?**
 - Why do you say this?

Walsall Borough Plans (15 minutes)

- **Imagine you were putting together the Walsall borough plan for the next 18 years, what would you include?**
 - What would the main sections be? E.g. environment, children and young people, street scene, clean and green, health and wellbeing, aging well, climate change, transport and infrastructure, resilient communities, voluntary and community sector.,
 - What should this cover?
 - What should it not include?

Wrap up (5 minutes)

- Invite any additional comments/queries
- Reaffirm incentive payment and timeframes for this

Thank and Close

Appendix 3: Discussion Guide – Young People Group

Background and introduction (5 minutes)

- **First I'd like to ask everyone to say a bit about themselves.**
- *Moderator to facilitate 'icebreaker' introductions with groups. Ask for:*
 4. Name?
 5. Where do you live (town)?
 6. How long have you lived there? Who do you live with?

Current experience of Walsall and Walsall council (30 minutes)

Task: Best and Worst things about the borough (of Walsall)

Ask respondents to write down the 3-5 things they think are best/they like about living in the borough of Walsall, and 3-5 things they think are bad/could be improved.

- **I'd like to now ask you to voice what you wrote down for the best things?**
 - Why did you say XX?
 - Do you have any specific experiences you can tell us in relation to XX?
 - Do you think these things are important in making somewhere a good place to live?
 - *Moderator to allow for general discussion around the topics mentioned, gauge agreement, demographic differences.*

- **And now, what did everyone write down for things that could be improved?**
 - Why did you say XX?
 - Do you have any specific experiences you can tell us in relation to XX?
 - Do you think these things are important in making somewhere a good place to live?
 - *Moderator to allow for general discussion around the topics mentioned, gauge agreement, demographic differences.*

- **How do you find the facilities in the borough?**
 - How is the quality of housing?
 - How are the schools/education services?
 - How do you find travelling around the borough of Walsall?
 - Is there any congestion
 - Is public transport easily available?
 - Do you find there are enough green spaces?
 - Are there enough things to do in the borough of Walsall? Think about sports and leisure, eating and drinking, shopping, culture and arts, activities for children.
 - What would you like to see more of?

- **Are there any groups of people you think the borough of Walsall caters particularly well for, over others?**
 - Young families? Businesses? Students? Young professionals? Retired people?
 - Why?

- **Is there a sense of community where you live?**

- Are there any community activities that you are a part of or have heard about?
 - Can you give examples
 - How does it feel to be involved/not involved in the community?
 - How often, if ever, do you come together as a community?
- Is there any support and/or facilities for older people, vulnerable people, and disabled people?

- **Is there anything you are currently concerned about in the borough Walsall?**
 - Probes: employment, affordable housing, crime
 - Why do you say that?

- **How safe do you feel when out and about in the borough of Walsall?**
 - During the day?
 - After dark?
 - What, if anything, worries you? Why?

The 'ideal' borough (15 minutes)

Show participants a list of facilities and ask them to prioritise them from highest to lowest importance.

- **Please share what you put as the highest and lowest priority**
 - Why is this your highest priority?
 - Why is this your lowest priority?

Ask participants to write down a couple of bullets on what their ideal borough would look like

- **Please share what your 'ideal' borough would look like with the rest of the group**
 - Why would this be your ideal?
 - Why did you focus on these areas?
 - How would you feel if you lived in your 'ideal' borough?

- **What are the main differences between your 'ideal' borough and your current experience of where you live now?**

Aspirations for the future of Walsall (15 minutes)

- **Thinking about the next 18 years in the borough of Walsall, what would you like the future to look like?**
 - What is the most important thing you would like to see where you live, work and socialise in the next 18 years?
 - Why do you say this?
 - Do you think others would agree with you?
 - Is there anything that you would not like to see change?
 - Why do you say this?

- **What do you think the next 18 years will look like?**
 - How do you envisage life in the borough of Walsall in the next 18 years?
 - Do you think you will still live in the area?

- Where do you think changes or improvements will be made?
 - What do you think will stay the same?
- **What do you think should be prioritised over the next 18 years to improve the borough?**
 - Why do you think this?
 - Would you like to see an improvement to the facilities and services?
 - Probe with: infrastructure, safety, education, open space, health services
 - How could be improved?
- **Are you concerned about the impact of climate change in the future?**
 - Why are you concerned / what concerns you?
 - How might organisations and residents work together to tackle the effects of climate change?
 - What are you already doing or would be willing to do to tackle climate change?
 - Would you like there to be a green agenda in Walsall over the next 18 years?
 - What would you like to see happen?
- **Do you think Walsall Council and the partner organisations they work with are on track to achieve positive change?**
 - Why do you say this?

Walsall Borough Plans (15 minutes)

- **Imagine you were putting together the Walsall borough plan for the next 18 years, what would you include?**
 - What would the main sections be? E.g. environment, children and young people, street scene, clean and green, health and wellbeing, aging well, climate change, transport and infrastructure, resilient communities, voluntary and community sector.,
 - What should this cover?
 - What should it not include?

Wrap up (5 minutes)

- Invite any additional comments/queries
- Reaffirm incentive payment and timeframes for this

Thank and Close

Appendix 4: Discussion Guide – Parents Group

Background and introduction (5 minutes)

- **First I'd like to ask everyone to say a bit about themselves.**
- *Moderator to facilitate 'icebreaker' introductions with groups. Ask for:*
 7. Name?
 8. Where do you live (town)?
 9. How long have you lived there? Who do you live with?
 10. Children and age(s)? Expecting a baby?

Current experience of living in the borough of Walsall (30 minutes)

Task: Best and Worst things about the borough (of Walsall)

Ask respondents to write down the 3-5 things they think are best/they like about living in the borough of Walsall, and 3-5 things they think are bad/could be improved.

- **I'd like to now ask you to voice what you wrote down for the best things?**
 - Why did you say XX?
 - Do you have any specific experiences you can tell us in relation to XX?
 - Do you think these things are important in making somewhere a good place to live?
 - *Moderator to allow for general discussion around the topics mentioned, gauge agreement, demographic differences.*

- **And now, what did everyone write down for things that could be improved?**
 - Why did you say XX?
 - Do you have any specific experiences you can tell us in relation to XX?
 - Do you think these things are important in making somewhere a good place to live?
 - *Moderator to allow for general discussion around the topics mentioned, gauge agreement, demographic differences.*
 -

- **How do you find the facilities in the borough?**
 - How is the quality of housing?
 - How are the schools/education services?
 - How do you find travelling around the borough of Walsall?
 - Is there any congestion
 - Is public transport easily available?
 - Do you find there are enough green spaces?
 - Are there enough things to do in the borough of Walsall? Think about sports and leisure, eating and drinking, shopping, culture and arts, activities for children.
 - What would you like to see more of?

- **Is the borough of Walsall a good place to grow up / raise a family?**
 - Why?
 - How could the borough be improved to make it a better place to raise a family?

- **Is there anything you are currently concerned about in the borough Walsall?**

- Probes: employment, affordable housing, crime
- Why do you say that?
- Thinking about your child's or children's future, what if anything concerns you the most?
- What excites you?
- **How safe do you feel when out and about in the borough of Walsall?**
 - During the day?
 - After dark?
 - What, if anything, worries you? Why?

The 'ideal' borough (15 minutes)

Show participants a list of facilities and ask them to prioritise them from highest to lowest importance.

- **Please share what you put as the highest and lowest priority**
 - Why is this your highest priority?
 - Why is this your lowest priority?

Ask participants to write down a couple of bullets on what their ideal borough would look like

- **Please share what your 'ideal' borough would look like with the rest of the group**
 - Why would this be your ideal?
 - Why did you focus on these areas?
 - How would you feel if you lived in your 'ideal' borough?
- **What are the main differences between your 'ideal' borough and your current experience of where you live now?**

Aspirations for the future of Walsall (15 minutes)

- **Thinking about the next 18 years in the borough of Walsall, what would you like the future to look like for your child or children?**
 - What is the most important thing you would like to see where you and your family live, work and socialise in the next 18 years?
 - Why do you say this?
 - Do you think others would agree with you?
 - Is there anything that you would not like to see change?
 - Why do you say this?
- **What do you think the next 18 years will look like?**
 - How do you envisage life in the borough of Walsall in the next 18 years?
 - Do you think you will still live in the area? Will your child or children? Why / why not?
 - Where do you think changes or improvements will be made?
 - What do you think will stay the same?
- **What do you think should be prioritised over the next 18 years to improve the borough?**
 - Why do you think this?
 - Would you like to see an improvement to the facilities and services?

- Probe with: infrastructure, safety, education, open space, health services
- How could be improved?
- **Are you concerned about the impact of climate change in the future?**
 - Why are you concerned / what concerns you?
 - How might organisations and residents work together to tackle the effects of climate change?
 - What are you already doing or would be willing to do to tackle climate change?
 - Would you like there to be a green agenda in Walsall over the next 18 years?
 - What would you like to see happen?
- **Do you think Walsall Council and the partner organisations they work with are on track to achieve positive change?**
 - Why do you say this?

Walsall Borough Plans (15 minutes)

- **If you were putting together the Walsall borough plan for the next 18 years, thinking specifically about your child or children (the adults of the future) what would you include?**
 - What would be your top consideration?
 - How would this impact their life in the borough?
- **What wouldn't you include?**
 - Why is this not important to you?

Wrap up (5 minutes)

- Invite any additional comments/queries
- Reaffirm incentive payment and timeframes for this

Thank and Close

Appendix 5: Discussion Guide – Parents Interviews

Introduction

- Name?
- Where do you live (town)?
- How long have you lived there? Who do you live with?
- Children and age(s)? Expecting a baby?

What's the best / worst things about the borough (of Walsall)?

What makes Walsall a good place to live, what would make it better?

Is the borough of Walsall a good place to grow up / raise a family?

- Why?
- How could the borough be improved to make it a better place to raise a family?

Is there anything you are currently concerned about in the borough Walsall?

- Probes: employment, affordable housing, crime
 - Why do you say that?
- Thinking about your child's or children's future, what if anything concerns you the most? What excites you?

Thinking about the next 18 years in the borough of Walsall, what would you like the future to look like for your child or children?

- What is the most important thing you would like to see where you and your family live, work and socialise in the next 18 years?
 - Why do you say this?
- Do you think others would agree with you?
- Is there anything that you would not like to see change?
 - Why do you say this?

If you were putting together the Walsall borough plan for the next 18 years, thinking specifically about your child or children (the adults of the future) what would you include?

- What would be your top consideration?
- How would this impact their life in the borough?

What wouldn't you include?

- Why is this not important to you?



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Produced by BMG Research

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www.bmgresearch.co.uk

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Market Research Society Company Partner

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The International Standard for Information Security Management ISO 27001:2013

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